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ART. IV.—*Poetical Works of EDMUND WALLER.* London : John W. Parker and Son.

EDMUND WALLER was born of an ancient, affluent, and influential family, at Coleshill, in the county of Hertfordshire, England, on the 3d of March, 1605. He was educated at Eton, and at King's College in Cambridge. It has been said with truth, that his life had more romance in it than his poetry. He entered Parliament, and wrote his first poem, when not quite seventeen years of age. Young, handsome, brilliant, accomplished, and rich, he became a great favorite at the court of James I. He led this fascinating life until he was twenty-six years of age, when he married Miss Bankes, of London, a great heiress. He had many rivals for the hand of this young lady, but triumphed over them all. She died, however, within three years of her marriage, and left him a widower at twenty-nine. It seems that he was not inconsolable, for he soon began to sigh at the feet of Lady Dorothea Sidney, the eldest daughter of the Earl of Leicester. He wooed her in much melodious verse ; but although she was flattered by the homage of so brilliant a man, her heart was not touched by it, for she rejected him, and shortly afterward married Henry, Lord Spenser, subsequently created Earl of Sunderland by Charles I., in whose cause he was killed, four years after his marriage, while fighting gallantly at the battle of Newbury.

Waller had considered himself irresistible, and Lady Sidney's refusal to bestow her hand upon him was a severe blow to his pride and self-conceit. He never forgot nor forgave it. They did not meet again until, a long time afterward, they came together at Lady Wharton's, in Woburn. They then were both quite advanced in years. The lady was indeed proud that so distinguished a man had once admired her, and she endeavored to recall to his mind those days when he made the groves of Penshurst vocal with her praises ; for she said to him, " Ah ! Mr. Waller, when will you again write such charming verses about me as you used to write in former days ? " " When, madam," replied the resentful poet, with

more wit than gallantry,—“when you are as young and handsome as you were then.” It is hazardous to trifle with a rejected suitor if he is a man of wit.

Some time—it is not known how long—after Waller’s unsuccessful attempt to win Lady Sidney’s hand, he married a young lady, whose name even cannot be precisely determined. It was either Bresse or Breaux. Dr. Johnson says, “It has not been discovered that this wife was won by his poetry”; and the old moralist goes on, in true Johnsonian style, to remark: “He doubtless praised some whom he would have been afraid to marry, and perhaps married one whom he would have been ashamed to praise. Many qualities contribute to domestic happiness upon which poetry has no colors to bestow, and many airs and sallies may delight the imagination which he who flatters them never can approve.”

In 1640 Waller opposed the measures of the Court; but when King Charles erected his standard he assisted him with money. In 1642 he was one of the commissioners sent by Parliament to treat with the King at Oxford, after the battle of Edgehill, and to propose conditions of peace. Soon after this, the plot known in history as Waller’s Plot was discovered. This was a plot to give the city and Tower of London into the King’s hands. A full account of it is found in Clarendon’s History. All concerned in this plot were condemned to death; but only two were executed. Waller’s behavior was abject and pusillanimous in the extreme. He seemed to have a coward’s love of life. He confessed everything, and implicated all his noble friends, in order if possible to save his own head. He flattered and cajoled many influential persons, bribed some, and threatened others. The result was that he escaped with his life; but he was imprisoned for a year, and then fined ten thousand pounds, and banished from the country.

Percival Stockdale, who wrote the short biography of Waller prefixed to the edition of his Works published in 1773, says, in allusion to his conduct on this occasion: “Let us not condemn him with untempered severity because he was not a prodigy which the world hath seldom seen,—because his character included not the poet, the orator, and the hero.”

Waller, when forced to leave England, made a tour through Italy and Switzerland, and then settled in Paris, where he kept open house and lived in great style for ten years. At the expiration of that time he obtained permission from Cromwell to return home; and the insinuating, flattering, and fascinating poet soon became extremely intimate with the Lord Protector, upon whom he wrote a fulsome Panegyric, which is considered one of his best poems, and which contains some fine verses. When Charles II. was restored to the throne, Waller was ready with a congratulatory poem. The King could not resist the agreeable fellow, and they were soon upon intimate terms. The clever and discriminating monarch had read Waller's Panegyric on Cromwell, and he perceived that it possessed greater literary merit than the congratulatory address to himself, and he could not refrain from remarking this to Waller, whose instantaneous and witty reply was, "We poets, sire, always succeed much better in fiction than in truth."

"It is not possible to read without some contempt and indignation," says Dr. Johnson, "poems of the same author ascribing the highest degree of *power and piety* to Charles I., then transferring the *power and piety* to Oliver Cromwell,—now inviting Oliver to take the crown, and then congratulating Charles II. on his recovered right. . . . Poets indeed profess fiction, but the legitimate end of fiction is the conveyance of truth; and he that has flattery ready for all whom the vicissitudes of the world happen to exalt, must be scorned as a prostituted mind, that may retain the glitter of wit, but has lost the dignity of virtue."

Many anecdotes are related of Waller, but of course we have not space to repeat them. One that is illustrative of his flattery and his wit we shall, however, venture to insert. Some one showed him a copy of verses on the death of a stag, by the Duchess of Newcastle. He read them, and exclaimed that he would willingly give all his own productions to be their author. We can imagine how gratified her Grace must have been when this was repeated to her. One of Waller's friends rallied him upon this fulsome praise, and asked him if "all his own productions were not rather too much to give for her Grace's verses." "No," replied Waller, "nothing would be too much to give, if thereby a lady could be saved from the disgrace of such a vile performance."

Waller was much in Parliament during his life. He was one of the most brilliant and showy members, if not one of the strongest and weightiest. The last time he was chosen for Parliament was in 1685, after James II. came to the throne. He was then sent from Saltash, in Cornwall, being more than eighty years of age.

It is almost superfluous to say that he was as great a favorite with King James II. as he had previously been with James I., Charles I., Oliver Cromwell, and Charles II. The sagacious old politician saw clearly to what end the rash and headstrong career of James II. would lead, and he said openly that he would be left like a whale thrown upon the strand. When Waller's daughter was about to be married to Dr. Birch, a clergyman of the Church of England, the King sent a gentleman to Waller to tell him that he wondered he should ally his daughter to a falling Church. "The King does me great honor," said Waller, "to interest himself in my domestic affairs; but tell his Majesty that I have lived long enough to observe that this falling Church has a great trick of rising again."

As age began to tell upon Waller with great severity, it induced him to think it high time to turn his thoughts heavenward. As yet he had never done this. He had exhausted the language of adulation and supplication upon kings, queens, and pretty women. It now occurred to him that there was a power greater than all these, and to this power he knelt with his Muse. He opened a vein he had never before worked, and wrote some serious poems, thinking, perhaps, that they would answer as a set-off against the heartlessness and selfishness of his previous career, — his pursuit for upward of four-score years of the follies, frivolities, and vanities of the world. But these sacrifices to the Lord of what the Devil has left seldom result very successfully, and Waller's poems upon "Divine Love," "The Fear of God," and like subjects, are not very brilliant productions. There is occasionally a flashing up of the old fire, but it is very seldom. He says in one of them : —

"Wrestling with death, these lines I did indite;
No other theme could give my soul delight.
O that my youth had thus employed my pen,
Or that I now could write as well as then!"

What Arsène Houssaye says of Piron, is applicable to Waller :—

“ When he sought God at the end of his days, it was too late, — not for his soul, but for his poetry. God loves and blesses those poets who seek him during their best days, in the full bloom of youth, in the first budding of the soul. God perhaps is severe to those who forget him amid the vain joys of earth, who remember his name only at the threshold of the tomb, who only bow their heads before his might when beneath the snows of Death.”

Waller now perceived that his end was approaching, and bought a small house in Coleshill, his birthplace, saying that he should be glad to die, like the stag, where he was roused. This, however, was not permitted him. Death overtook him at Beaconsfield, and on the 21st of October, 1687, this graceful poet and brilliant wit, having first partaken of the sacrament and declared his faith in Christianity, calmly yielded to the summons from on high. Lord Clarendon says of him :—

“ There needs no more be said to extol the excellence and power of his wit and pleasantness of his conversation, than that it was of magnitude enough to cover a world of very great faults, that is, so to cover them that they were not taken notice of to his reproach ;— viz., a narrowness in his nature to the lowest degree ; an abjectness and want of courage to support him in any virtuous undertaking ; an insinuation and servile flattery to the height the vainest and most imperious nature could be contented with ;— that it preserved and won his life from those who were most resolved to take it, and on an occasion in which he ought to have been ambitious to have lost it ; and then preserved him again from the reproach and contempt that was due to him for so preserving it, and for vindicating it at such a price ;— that it had power to reconcile him to those whom he had most offended and provoked, and continued to his age with that rare felicity that his company was acceptable where his spirit was odious ; and he was at least pitied where he was most detested.”

Bishop Burnet, speaking of his Parliamentary career, says :—

“ He was the delight of the House ; and even at eighty he said the liveliest things of any among them ; he was only concerned to say that which should make him be applauded ; but he never laid the business of the House to heart, being a vain and empty, though a witty man.”

Of Waller's merit as a poet, Fenton, who edited an edition

of his Works, writes, "He was the maker and model of melodious verse"; and in another notice of him that we have seen, it is said that "as a poet he is entitled to the highest praise,—that he may be called the parent of English verse, and the first who showed us that our language had beauty and numbers." The writer of this last criticism could not have been very well versed in English literature. Waller was indeed smooth and melodious in his numbers,—more so than the generality of the poets of his day, who in the art of modulation had retrograded from the point of advancement attained by the Elizabethan poets; but to call him the parent of English verse, and the first who showed us that our language had beauty and numbers, is simply absurd. The only manner in which this excessive laudation can be accounted for, is by the fact that these writers were his contemporaries, and Waller's personal fascinations must have influenced their judgments; for even Lord Clarendon, who speaks so strongly in condemnation of Waller's character as a man, says that as a poet "he surprised the town, as though a tenth Muse had been newly born to cherish drooping Poetry."

Waller was essentially a court poet, and no man ever paid a compliment in verse more elegantly than he. He was not a voluminous writer. All his verses are contained in the small volume now before us. His songs and addresses to his inamoratas are certainly very sweet, and his language is always pure and carefully chosen. Pope thought so highly of it, that, in planning a dictionary that should be an authority for style, he selected Waller as one of the best examples of poetical diction. His love-poems are delicate and refined, but there does not seem to be much real emotion in them. His Muse is a pretty and graceful creature; but though she delights the eye she seldom interests the heart. As a specimen of the grace with which Waller wrote, we will quote a little song that is in his very best manner, and is certainly extremely pleasing.

"Go, lovely rose,
Tell her that wastes her time and me,
That now she knows,
When I resemble her to thee,
How sweet and fair she seems to be.

“ Tell her that ’s young,
And shuns to have her graces spied,
That hadst thou sprung
In deserts where no men abide,
Thou must have uncommended died.

“ Small is the worth
Of Beauty from the light retired ;
Bid her come forth,
Suffer herself to be desired,
And not blush so to be admired.

“ Then die, that she
The common fate of all things rare
May read in thee,
How small a part of time they share
That are so wondrous sweet and fair.”

In most of Waller’s poems to women there is an excess of praise, and a stereotyped style of flattery that must have made the persons addressed doubtful of his sincerity. He attributes nearly the same charms to every woman he eulogizes. It makes no difference whether it is the Queen, the Duchess of York, Lady Dorothea Sidney, or any other of the numberless other fair ones to whom he wrote. Robert Bell says : —

“ The fact that he could transfer his sympathies with such facility from one lady to another, and include at nearly the same moment so many in his comprehensive litany, materially diminishes the confidence we might otherwise be disposed to place in the sincerity of his devotion to Lady Sidney. A variety of inspirations may be necessary to supply the demands of a poetical temperament, but it may be reasonably doubted whether he was ever moved by a true passion, who professes to have been moved by it frequently. Impressions that succeed each other so rapidly may occupy the fancy of a poet, but can scarcely be supposed to reach his heart.”

As an illustration of our remark that Waller paid a compliment in verse quite elegantly, we quote two stanzas of a short piece to a lady, on her singing a song of his own composing. This is but one of many.

“ Chloris, yourself you so excel,
When you vouchsafe to breathe my thought,
That, like a spirit, with this spell
Of my own teaching I am caught.

“That eagle’s fate and mine are one,
Which on the shaft that made him die
Espied a feather of his own,
Wherewith he wont to soar so high.”

The figure of an eagle killed by a dart feathered from his own wing is very fine. It has since been used by Lord Byron, in his lines upon Henry Kirke White. Perhaps both he and Waller took it from “The Myrmidons” of Æschylus, where it is to be found.

From the last verses that Waller ever composed we will make a short extract. They were written upon the Divine Poems he had just completed, and are particularly interesting from the fact that he was then more than eighty-two years of age and felt himself dying, and, as he said, “for age he could neither read nor write.” They were dictated to his daughter Margaret.

“The seas are quiet when the wind gives o’er :
So calm are we when passions are no more !
For then we know how vain it is to boast
Of fleeting things so certain to be lost.
Clouds of affection from our younger eyes
Conceal that emptiness that Age describes.

“The soul’s dark cottage, battered and decayed,
Lets in new light through chinks that Time has made ;
Stronger by weakness, wiser men become
As they draw near to their eternal home.
Leaving the old, both worlds at once they view
That stand upon the threshold of the new.”

This was the flashing up of the candle in the socket before going finally out.

The passages of merit in Waller’s writings that elevate him from “the mob of gentlemen who wrote with ease,” prove that he had the intellect to be a far greater poet than he was, but he had not the heart. He was a brilliant wit, an elegant verse-writer, but he was as destitute of deep feeling as he was of high principle. It was only when trembling on the borders of the grave that he manifested anything like a noble and generous emotion. It has been beautifully said by the poet Campbell, that

“To live in hearts we leave behind
Is not to die” ;

but this was not the creed of Waller. To be applauded while he lived was the extent of his ambition, and he cared not for the opinion posterity might entertain either of him or of his verses. Gifted as he was, he might have "bought golden opinions from all sorts of people," and have made his name loved and honored in his own and all succeeding generations; but the desire to have his memory kept ever green in the hearts of those who came after him, and his name ever spoken in accents of love and reverence, — which, next to the aspiration for an immortal crown, is the purest and holiest ambition that can possess the soul of man, — never held a place in Waller's soul. Had he been simply a clever man, the limit of whose gift of song was a prettily turned string of verses immortalizing a glove or a girdle, a smile or a sigh, a fan or a feather, he would not be amenable to our censure; but the passages in his writings which prove that he had been touched with Promethean fire induce us to exclaim, "How much this man might have done for the interests of his kind!" God gave him a command over the lyre, and he should have swept the strings to nobler ends and uses. We do not complain that his subjects are unworthy. Subjects are not material. There is instruction to be drawn from the most trivial objects that surround us, and the master poet can make his theme, whatever it may be, the vehicle of an ennobling sentiment or an instructive moral. It matters little what the text is, so that the commentary be fructifying. But Waller misused the talent that God had given him. There is not in his poetry a single strain which betokens sympathy with suffering humanity. He has made no effort to rouse the despairing, to soothe the afflicted, to excite to heroic deeds, to nerve the heart for the hour of trial and of sorrow, to raise the soul of his fellow-man above the frowns of fortune, or to create a single sublime emotion in the heart. To do these things is the lofty mission of the poet. To Waller was granted the divine power to accomplish such precious ends, and he failed of them. He was unfaithful to the trust reposed in him, and, with full and brilliant capacity, fell immeasurably below the high office of the bard.